



INTERVIEW

with NoViolet Bulawayo

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by Christian Hartselle

NoViolet Bulawayo, today a Stegner Fellow at Stanford University and recognized with a Truman Capote Fellowship, carries with her the life of an American and her childhood's Zimbabwe. She explores this duality in *We Need New Names*, published in 2013, and is the winner of a myriad of awards, including the Hemingway Foundation Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction, and Etisalat Prize for Literature.

CH: To get us started, what were some responses to the novel that were surprising to you after its publication?

NB: One that was surprising was the idea that the book was written for the West because I wasn't thinking of any audience when I was writing. I mean, I was holed up in workshop and all that existed were my blank pages and the story inside me. If you'd told me then that the thing would be published, and to even 2 cents acclaim, I'd have laughed probably, publication was another universe I wasn't worried about at the time, thanks to my mentor Helena Maria Viramontes, who kept me grounded and focused on the right thing, which was writing and honoring the damn story. What annoys me about this response is that it's not only very lazy, but also supposes that the West is some kind of center, which is not true. Sure I live and produce from here but my creative impulse is more complicated.

That said, I guess after a while, you realize when your book is out, you no longer own it; readers will have opinions and that's one of them.

CH: We were talking last night at the dinner about picture-taking in the novel. First, in *Hitting Budapest*, Darling and her friends encounter a white woman who is astounded by these children in poverty, and she photographs them without even asking. Then,

later, when the NGOs arrive to Paradise, the NGOs take pictures of all of the children again. Was one of your goals in the novel to introduce to Westerners the dehumanization that Zimbabweans might feel with this kind of picture-taking?

NB: When I am considering the culture of NGOs going into the “third world,” I’m interested in how viewing “the other” plays out especially through visual representation. I wasn’t necessarily thinking of Zimbabwe specifically because it’s happening all over. But I wanted the outsider/picture-taker to rethink their engagement. Forget about yourself and gadgets for a minute, what does it mean to be on the other side, to be the one whose picture is taken? What does it mean to have it taken without your consent, without anyone caring? I think one of the kids says something like “the NGO people don’t care that we’re embarrassed by our dirt and torn clothing, that we’d rather not take pictures, but they do it all the same.” It is a question of power, it’s a question of privilege, of entitlement over another’s body, and it’s not a good thing.

Part of the social media experience today is that people are always posting all sorts of pictures of other people taken on trips, and some of them are quite saddening to see. I don’t understand the obsession myself, perhaps I’m missing something. But I’ll mention that as someone who came into the U.S. as an outsider, I don’t remember going around taking pictures of Americans especially in less fortunate situations, and I don’t see tourists generally doing this. I feel like it’s our responsibility to reconsider some of the things that we do to others, violence comes in all forms.

CH: That makes me think of how Chipso, like Paris Hilton, doesn’t want too many pictures. Darling understands references to Western celebrities and she can use them, and she’s not even in this celebrity-obsessed culture. Maybe speak a bit on what you were saying when you wrote that.

NB: Darling and her friends may not necessarily live in a celebrity-obsessed culture but they are still aware of it, and are generally very much aware of the “out-there” because of the fluidity of

culture, and how factors like technology and migration mean that the world is now a small space, more connected than ever before. But of course what is striking to me is how one-sided this is—a kid in Mozambique can tell you who Barack Obama is, but sometimes you will meet Western kids in college who cannot name the president of Zimbabwe, for instance.

So the challenge—since we're here with undergrads, I'll say that the challenge is to have students rethink their relationship with the world. Information is at our fingertips, and it doesn't take much to be curious about how other people live, to learn what is out there beyond you. And just educate yourself so you become more of a citizen of the world.

CH: Let's talk about the second half of the novel when Darling's in the States. When Darling gets here, she comments that the maize in America insults her teeth. Given that she was starving in Paradise, I didn't think she would have minded this American maize, but now that she's an American, she's just thinking, I don't like the way that tastes. What do you think are some things that people like Darling never adjust to?

NB: Everyone who leaves their homeland to live in another has to deal with all sorts of adjustments and of course one of the easy ones, as in Darling's case, is food. But beyond that she has a hard time with the harsh Michigan winters (when we first meet her she is indoors and not by choice, but because the cold and the snow have taken over the outside, making it unliveable for someone who's otherwise spent most of her life outdoors). There's also alienation from the homeland itself, the geographic space, and from family. There is the language barrier that may be dealt with but not totally done away with. And that specific melancholy that may occasionally seize an immigrant because the body and soul remembers another space and will crave for it.

CH: Are you familiar with the term Islamophobia? I'm talking about a fear or dislike of Muslim people post-9/11. I bring this up because, in your book, there was a woman in a hijab in a car next to Darling, and then immediately there is a mention by Darling's friend of a

boy who brought a gun to school, almost as if the first one emotionally triggered the next. Was this a sort of subtle reference to Islamophobia?

NB: We don't exactly see Islamophobia play out in the scene itself but we still need to think about the issues around the scene. George brings a gun to school, because at the time I was writing, I was just troubled by kids bringing guns to school and shooting other kids. To actually have that level of atrocity, kids losing their lives because another kid was able to get possession of a gun and make the decision to take lives, that was and still remains troubling for me personally. I understand that there are sometimes mental health issues involved, but it still doesn't make sense, and of course as it keeps happening, I'm like, when will this country take the necessary steps to make sure that no more blood is spilled in schools? When will it say, enough? When will it put children's lives first? Given that *We Need New Names* is really a book that is hopefully meant to have people thinking and talking about what should concern us as communities, especially with school kids themselves reading it, I hope that section gets the necessary conversation going in schools. Now with the woman, I believe they are coming from the mall and they see her, they just look at her, they just look at each other...

CH: And keep driving.

NB: They drive off. The kids are struggling to understand difference in that scene. They are aware of her because she is different, but they are also living in a time when they are bombarded with these negative images of Muslims that may start creating even further divisions between people of different cultures. People who are not better informed might think of a woman in a hijab one way based on what they've seen on TV but as we as readers hopefully know, at least from what we read from the George narrative, is that violence is being committed by all sorts of people.

CH: Some parts of the novel, like the chapter title "How They Left," didn't resemble the rest of the narrative... I read them more like poetry. The language is gorgeous, and what it was saying was

much more, I guess, collective in a sense. Did you draw from your experience with poetry when writing these parts?

NB: I drew both from my experience with poetry and my experience with orature. I tried my hand at poetry writing before fiction took over, and of course I'm haunted by the distinct voices of my pops and grandmother, among the many storytellers I knew growing up. But what I was doing there is I was trying to step outside Darling's voice and evoke the community because we really don't live our lives as individuals, and on that note I needed Darling's story to have the communal narrative somewhere in the background, sort of anchoring and complimenting it. I don't know if I succeeded, but I really wanted those sections to be beautiful.

CH: They were.

NB: Thank you. I was also dealing with things that were especially painful to write, so I imagined paring them with beautiful language could perhaps make for a somewhat bearable reading experience.

CH: And I think that's refreshing for American readers. They don't usually read something in that collective voice. I want to ask about the ending. Were you always going to end with Chipó on the phone, and the image of the dog?

NB: That wasn't the original ending. I don't remember what the ending was, it could have even been in the U.S. because that's where Darling was physically. But as I was saying earlier, some of the things that end up making it into the book, and work well, can actually come from desperation, come from you saying, "What can I do now since what I had in mind is not working?" And this ending came at the last minute. I suddenly woke up to the realization that I had to make the book come full circle. I had to have Darling go back home. Which became important considering the fact that she couldn't physically go at the time. So what do you do when you are an immigrant and your papers don't allow you to go home?

Memory can be something that allows you to make that journey,

you can just go in your head you know. Technology, too, luckily for us nowadays—it can forge a bridge between that distance—but for Darling it was remembering. She keeps Paradise alive through remembering, and that ending is her remembering what it was like in that place at that time.

CH: It was interesting because the further you got into the second half, the less she was referencing her culture but then at the end, she goes back in memory.

If you'll let me shift gears, I'd like to ask a craft question. Are you more of a pre-writer or a revisor?

NB: I do both. My process starts in the head. I grew up hearing stories all the time. So I try to tell myself a story in the head. Sometimes that takes a while depending on what the story is and how long it is. I spent a long time sorting it out before I even attempt to write it because I like the experience of just sitting down and letting it flow. I get a high from working like that. And for me to get there, I have to prepare as much as I can in my head. When it gets to the writing, I write in my notebooks first. I like the process of sitting down and putting word on paper until my hand hurts. I think differently this way, I relate to what I am writing differently, and of course my revisions happen in notebooks as well. By the time I get onto the computer, I am quite close to where I need to be getting. But of course there is still more revision to come.

CH: So you do a lot of writing by hand.

NB: I do. I can't write on a computer, really.

CH: That's unique.

NB: That's how I got into it. And with all of the traveling I do, it's helpful not to rely on gadgets, especially when you may not have power.

CH: Last question: which part of the book was the hardest part to write?

NB: The first half was hardest to write because it came from a real place, it was fueled by what my country was going through at the time and it wasn't pretty. As somebody who grew up knowing a normal country and had a beautiful childhood in it, it was jarring to get used to a country of power cuts, a country of water cuts, a country where a high percentage of people lost their jobs. A country where the health system went down. A country where an election was suddenly marred by violence. That was especially hard.

I wrote the project for many reasons, but some of it was actually dealing with and making sense of this unravelling. Things have changed, and fortunately, Zimbabwe's no longer the exact same place of desperation that gave birth to *We Need New Names*. The country has dusted its clothes and tucked a flower in her hair and is looking ahead with a brave smile, so I kind of see the project as a snapshot of a particular moment in Zimbabwe's recent history. My prayer is that we don't return to it, especially the years 2008-9.

All that said, there is still room for celebrating place and for voice. I was able to enjoy those things in the first half of the book. Inasmuch as the circumstances were hard, Darling's humanity, voice and humor allowed me some light to balance it all out.

CH: Thanks so much for talking to me. It was very enlightening, and I enjoyed your book a lot.

NB: It's my pleasure. Thank you for reading.